DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 337 361 SO 020 974

AUTHOR Smith, Timothy L.
TITLE Teaching about Religion in High Schools.
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Citizenship Education; *Controversial Issues (Course Content); Ethical Instruction; High Schools; History Instruction; Instructional Improvement; *Public Schools; *Religion; *Religious Factors; Textbook Content; *Textbook Evaluation; Textbooks; *United States History

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the importance of teaching about the place of religion in U.S. development and calls attention to the inadequate treatment of religion in history textbooks used in public secondary schools. Knowledge about various religious traditions is necessary to citizenship, and since it is not taught by parents or religious institutions, public schools must take responsibility for such education. As a central feature, religion affects other aspects of a culture, and is the foundation of morality in Western societies. Systematic reading and analysis of 14 major high school history texts for their content on religion revealed a profound neglect of religious factors. All of the textbooks studied were found to be unsatisfactory accounts of U.S. history because they neglected or omitted well-known facts about the role of religion. (GEA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

TIMOTHY L. SMITH, PH.D.
Professor of History
The Johns Hopkins University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
TIMOTHY L. SMITH
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED337361

TEACHING ABOUT RELIGION IN HIGH SCHOOLS

Much confusion on this issue has stemmed from the failure of educators generally, and that of persons opposed to any religious teaching in public schools, to note just what the U.S. Supreme court has ruled unconstitutional. The court disallowed religious observances of any sort, including, of course, school prayers and activities intended to proselyte or resulting in proselyting on behalf of any faith. Constitutionally, it placed no limitation whatsoever on the right to teach the facts about religion or on the right of musical groups to perform religiously-based music or of English teachers to assign and teach religiously oriented texts that have become integral parts of our multi-ethnic heritage. Conversely, insofar as teaching about diverse faiths may be construed to impart knowledge necessary to citizenship in an ethnically and religiously plural democracy, public schools are required by the various state constitutions to provide it.

The widespread argument that parents and the institutions sponsored by the different sects are solely responsible for religious education misses the point. In a democracy such as ours, the central task of the public schools is to educate young people about religious traditions other than their own. A sympathetic understanding of the general nature of these other faiths is plainly necessary to enable adults to exercise equality and sound political judgment. Eight or more years at a Roman Catholic

SO 020 974

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

parochial school will not help young people learn about Jews, Baptists or Mormons—or about the foreign relations of this country with either Ireland or Israel. Hebrew Schools do not do any better with Baptists or Mormons, or with the role of Black religion in Black culture and politics or of the American Jewish vote in Israeli foreign policies. Being brought up in Methodist or Presbyterian Sunday Schools and youth camps does not promise any clearer instruction about these groups either, to say nothing of the Roman Catholics, Greek or Russian Orthodox, and adherents of the several Pentecostal or Disciples of Christ denominations. Yet citizens need a rudimentary knowledge of each one, as the 1988 race for the presidency of the United States makes plain.

As for moral education conceived in nonsectarian terms, many state constitutions affirm what the United States Supreme Court has declared to be its central place in the public school curriculum. Future citizens require it, especially those without a firm grounding at home in the principles that govern or, we believe, should govern ethical relationships among human beings. All realize, moreover, that the foundations of morality in Western societies like ours rest upon the Hebrew Scriptures, as those writings are mediated by Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Eastern Orthodox Christian, and Black Protestant interpretations. Study of the Bible and of the Bible in literature, as well as morally significant texts from the literature of Hindu, Muslim, or Buddist sacred writings, are important ways of communicating that moral heritage to young people. Persons who know something of Zen Buddhism, for example, are aware of how close the resemblances are between its moral ideals and those that Deists (the religion, so we believe, of Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin), Wesleyans, Mennonites, and Jewish believers think they should aim to

practice.

What historian Richard Hofstadter once called "the paranoid style "of the extreme right in American politics, and the equally paranoid style that has emerged on what is sometimes called the liberal left, have muffled the voices of those who occupy the moral ground at the center. That middle ground has recently been clarified in a widely-circulated booklet, published in the summer of 1987 by the American Society for Curriculum and Development. I shared with other professionals from various fields in the authorship of that pamphlet. Widely reported in the newspaper press, it distinguished sharply between teaching the subject with sectarian aims and outcomes or simply with the hope of inspiring people to be religious, and teaching about religion so as to help future citizens to understand how the principal religious traditions have affected the lives and histories of sizable groups in American and world societies.

Against this background, high school and junior high school textbooks currently in use in the United States (as contrasted, perhaps, with many teachers) appear singularly inadequate in the way they handle religion, though in other respects the history texts used in senior high schools seem to this historian to be admirable. They have evolved to this state during the last fifty years, during which anthropologists have made historians increasingly aware that religion is a central feature of modern as well as primitive cultures. It shapes values, prescribes moral codes, and regulates norms of both public and private behavior, whether in politics, economics, or professional conduct. Moreover, multi-ethnic societies exist in many nations—Indonesia and Thailand, for example, or The Sudan, Hungary, The Soviet Union, or Brazil.

Partly as a result, perhaps, American historians have expanded their

long interest in the role of religion in American culture. That interest has been quickened greatly since the 1950's, when Henry F. May, a notable scholar at Berkeley, published in the magazine Church History his essay entitled "The Recovery of American Church History." In the past thirty years scholars have paid increased attention to the role of religion, not only in their specialized works but in the textbooks offered to American college undergraduates.

Some conceptions have undergone complete transformation. Among these are the "new" interpretation of Puritanism that Harvard's Professor Perry Miller popularized; a greatly enlarged interest in the colonial religious revivals (usually lumped together under the term "The Great Awakening"); the importance of the idea of the millennium in American life; the significance of religion in the public school movement; the relationship of social reforms to the urban revivals of the nineteenth century; and the role of Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Buddhist religion in the cultural life of immigrant communities. Emphasis upon the place of religion in the movement to abolish slavery continues, and upon the role of social Christianity and of socially concerned Judaism in ushering in the progressive movement of Theodore Roosevelt's day. These matters appear alongside the stories of secularization, of the triumph of science and scientific attitudes in the university community, and of the clash between new and secular ways of looking at human life and the traditional values maintained by the various religions prominent in America.

The founding fathers dreamed that America would offer divergent ideas in a "marketplace" of free thought and free publication. If our high school textbooks are to offer to students the same free exchange of ideas, those texts must, it seems to me, follow more closely the history of those

religious movements that contributed to variety in that marketplace. The textbooks required of high school history students have denied American youngsters that knowledge of the facts which is necessary to understand correctly the place of religion in American life.

To investigate the contents of the various textbooks and the way they deal with religious forces in American history, I have read systematically fourteen major ones recently in use. In general, these books fall far below the standard of American collegiate scholarship in showing the place of religion in America's development. Where they do mention religious forces, the facts to which they allude are so incomplete or so warped that students do not learn what the great majority of historical scholars think is true.

To illustrate, the texts uniformly ignore the colonial and later history of the Pennsylvania Germans, especially the so-called "Peace sects" of Mennonites, Amish, Brethren (German Baptists, or Dunkards, as they are popularly called), and Moravians. Indeed, they never mention the American peace crusade, as Professor Merl Curti, a textbook author, long ago taught us to term it.

Without exception, they omit discussion of the well-known religious views of those founding fathers who were Deists. It has always been clear to historians that the beliefs of men like Jefferson and Franklin rested on a rational rejection of the divinity of Jesus. But their ethical principles, emanating from the idea of a creating and beneficent deity, closely resembled those of Jesus and the Hebrew prophets and prompted them to advocate "civic virtue" as the basis of the republic. Though devoted, as the Pennsylvania peace churches were, to the separation of church and state, the Deists thought government should encourage religion generally.

For all the Jewish and Christian systems of belief known to them (and maintained, sometimes passionately, by the masses of ordinary people) promoted biblical principles of ethical behavior.

All but a very few of the books make no reference to the long series of Protestant religious awakenings in both the period before and the period after the American Revolution. And they ignore religious aspects of the large migration of Jews and Catholics from Germany in the first half of the nineteenth century, though lengthy sections describe the immigrants' social, economic, and political lives.

All the textbooks, by contrast, describe briefly the religion of the first settlers of New England, usually distinguishing properly the views of Pilgrims in Plymouth from those of Puritans in Massachusetts Bay. But all these treatments erroneously continue the myth of the Puritan flight from persecution in England and the search for "religious freedom" and "religious toleration" in the colonies. These aims did not motivate the colonizers of New England but inspired, rather, the Quakers and the German "peace people" of Pennsylvania. More important, the Massachusetts Puritans were committed to a positive "errand into the wilderness," as Perry Miller taught modern historians to call it. This theme of a national mission to all humankind was later internalized in every generation of school-children taught to memorize Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

Nearly all the textbooks, moreover, provide substantial discussions of the role of religion in pre-colonial native American Indian cultures. Several of them give students a brief picture of Roman Catholic missions in hispanic California before the Gold Rush. But the books uniformly omit the history of other Catholic and Protestant missions to the native Americans. Nearly all of the authors spell out in some detail the indisputable story

of white cruelty and oppression of native Americans, lasting down to the present day. But they make not the slightest reference to the long history of protest against this policy by Quakers, Methodists, and Roman Catholics in the Mississippi Valley.

The few discussions of religion in the movements for social reform in the pre-Civil War period are generally so brief or distorted in these textbooks, as compared with the host of analyses of these reforms that historians have published in the past half-century, as to provoke amazement. For example, the story of the movement for women's rights, told in loving detail in practically all of the texts, virtually denudes these pioneer female leaders of their religious commitments and motivations. Catherine Beecher, her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mary Lyon, founder of primly religious Mt. Holyoke College, Emma Willard, Margaret Fuller, and the notable Black women who are given a large part in the story—the intensely religious poet, Phyllis Wheatley, Harriet Tubman, "the black Moses," and Sojourner Truth, who is often quoted at length—frequently appear without any reference at all to their well-known religious motivation. The Methodist women and religious leaders who are now at the center of feminist historiography do not appear in these textbooks at all. Neither do Catholic sisterhoods. The authors sometimes describe even the early nineteenth-century temperance movement without reference to religion! By contrast, however, they frequently noted clergymen who opposed granting equal rights to women.

I was also dismayed to find much that is offensive to historians as well as to both white and black Christians in the way these textbooks handle the anti-slavery crusade. In general, the black abolitionists, whose important (and religiously-based) contributions Professors Benjamin

Quarles and C. Eric Lincoln have chronicled, occupy in these books the center of the stage, though the part religous faith played in inspiring them is muted. White pro-slavery thinkers, whose religion the textbooks often featured, share that spotlight. But the authors minimized the role of white Protestant abolitionists, who in historical fact bore the brunt of the burden, and rarely mention the religious source of their views. They take no notice of Methodism and make scant mention at best of the religion of black revolutionaries Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner. The authors of one textbook content themselves with the word that William Lloyd Garrison thought slavery evil and believed the anti-slavery crusade a religious one, which, as all historians know, it was.

The abolitionist movement occurred at the latest point in time and was the last great issue on which any of these authors made more than passing mention of the role of religion in American life. They entirely omitted reference to the religious aspects of the common school and public school movements. One would never discover from these textbooks that a majority of Roman Catholic parents cooperated with the public schools before 1900 or that Jews, black Protestants, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Mormons, Roman Catholic Hispanics, and Southern Baptists are to this day their steadfast, if now deeply troubled, supporters. The writers ignore the role of religion in the formation of new communities on successive frontiers, and never refer to the religious roots of the idea of national, or "manifest," destiny. The centrality of black religion in black culture after the Civil War is a closed book to that generation's great grandchildren. The Bible, American regard for which the accounts of virtually every European traveler noted, is taboo, even in discussions of Edgar Allen Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville. The work of overseas missionaries, which

African historians today usually honor, is a tale never told. The role of immigrant religion in shaping the foreign policies of the American people seems equally unmentionable, though it often determines the headlines of present-day newspapers and dominates television newscasts.

Moreover, only a few of these books mention the role of religion in forming and shaping the progressive impulse of Woodrow Wilson's time. The story of the "new immigrants" is well told, so far as the political and economic apects of domestic policy are concerned, but students would never guess that Eastern and Southern Europeans attended church, temple, or synagogue. Fundamentalists appear as champions of restrictive and anti-intellectual Christianity in the Scopes trial and in the enforcement of the Prohibition Amendment, but the textbooks never distinguish them from other evangelicals. Martin Luther King, Jr. only occasionally merits the remark that he was a minister, once or twice, even, a Baptist minister. More typical are the accounts of how he learned non-violence from Ghandi (not Jesus) and led a company of black radicals in opposing segregation. Black young people who recently helped to persuade our nation to celebrate his birthday know his story better than this! And the rest of us have recently had full opportunity to learn about him from the Pulitzer-prize winning biography by David Garrow, entitled Bearing the Cross.

Students do not, by contrast, know anything at all of Reinhold Niebuhr, but they should. Those who listen to Billy Graham or know about Jimmy Carter also should have the opportunity to read what they can never find in these textbooks: a brief but seriously analytical account of the place of evangelicals in recent culture. And young people who learn much about the campaign against nuclear weapons from Dr. Helen Caldicott should be able to discuss in their high school classrooms the aims and

achievements of today's religiously-based peace crusade, which transcends sectarian boundaries.

These textbooks, then, are all unsatisfactory accounts of American history precisely because they neglect or omit well-known facts about religion's role in important aspects of it. Imposing these, and only these textbooks, on high school students is a violation of their simple right to know aspects of the history of their country established by recent research and plainly important to good citizenship.

No one of the authors of these textbooks could hold the respect of his or her colleagues by conducting a college course exhibiting such neglect of religious factors. For example, on the list of books that students were expected to purchase in the half-dozen courses that the American history faculty at Johns Hopkins University offered to undergraduates in the fall of 1986 were the following: Perry Miller, Errand Into the Wilderness; Edmund S. Morgan, The Puritan Dilemma; Paul Johnson, The Shopkeeper's Millennium; Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin; Lawrence A. Cremin, American Education: The National Experience; Lawrence Levine, Black Consciousness and Black Culture; Mary P. Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class (which in several chapters considers the role of religion in the emergence of urban families); George C. Marsden, Fundamentalism in American Culture; James A. Reichly, Religion in American Public Life; Jay Dolan, The American Catholic Experience; and Nathan Glazer, American Judaism. In addition, students in each of their author's courses read Ronald Walters' American Reformers, John Higham's Strangers in the Land, John Pocock's The Machiavellian Moment, and my Revivalism and Social Reform.

The educational results of depriving students of such information are manifold, and in every case deplorable. I now understand why I have for

years found that college students are at first reticent and confused in discussions of religious forces in American history. Hearing them described analytically for the first time, many students pass through a period of doubt, wondering if their professors are presenting them with a shabby and outdated bill of intellectual goods. I did not know until I had read these textbooks that their ignorance extended to facts about Thomas Jefferson's religion, as well as Woodrow Wilson's and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s.

Such ignorance hinders students who aim at developing the upright characters that most of them are taught in their homes and churches to believe stem from religious faith and commitment. Jewish, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Buddhist, and liberal Quaker families instill that conviction in youngsters' minds, just as certainly as do white and black evangelicals. By ignoring and occasionally scorning many manifestations of traditional religion in American history, these textbooks leave students dubious about the moral views of their parents. The result is to intensify the inclination of youngsters to throw off what they think are outdated restraints, to refuse to discipline their lives or dedicate them to the general welfare, and to accept the reigning moral (or immoral) philosophy that the individual must clarify and live according to his or her own values. The founding fathers believed and the writers of state constitutions down to recent times affirmed that religion and the ethical convictions it inspires are good for the republic. Textbooks should assist, not impede, their cultivation.

I believe that these several volumes influence students to think that to modern and educated persons the only acceptable religious belief is humanism, and that in its recent and largely non-theistic form. These textbooks omit, as I have shown, discussion of even the idealistic humanism stemming from Thomas Jeffeson's Deism, as well as from what William Ellery Channing thought should be Christian Unitarianism, what Ralph Waldo Emerson called Transcendentalism and what Felix Adler taught a generation of Jews to call ethical culture. These omissions constitute a notable rejection of humanisms that are idealist in favor of those that are individualist and secular, though claiming only to be modern, democratic, scientific, and intellectual.